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**Passionate and Controversial:  
Janheinz Jahn as a Mediator of Cultures Among  
Europe, Africa, and America**

Janheinz Jahn (1918-1973) was one of those few and unique Europeans who played an eminent role in the formation of bridges between black cultures from all over the world and Western cultures, people who assisted in the development and promotion of African literatures at an early stage and changed the perspectives on such literatures in their home country. Ulli Beier, with whom Jahn founded (in 1957) and co-edited the journal *Black Orpheus*, was another mediator of that sort. Driven by some streak of craziness and geniality, such innovators go where no one goes and do what no one does. Some sort of historical and biographical coincidence singles them out for their specific destiny and destination. Hence they produce unusual, atypical, chequered biographies, and do not normally earn the esteem of official academia. Despite all his great merits and international recognition, especially in the United States of America, Jahn never found a place in the German academy – the relationship was rather one of mutual disdain.

Some kind of blind impulse made Jahn find “Africa” and “Africa” find Jahn. From early on, Jahn was a man of the world and a man with a worldview. Born in Frankfurt in 1918 into a well-to-do family, he studied art history, drama, Arabic, Italian and German literature in Munich and Perugia. During World War II he was recruited by the German army but managed to escape a direct military involvement by writing sketches, plays and songs, which he staged with soldiers at the front (“Front-Theater”). Because of the many languages he spoke and his worldly manners he was also deployed as a guide and interpreter for Wehrmacht officers on vacation in Italy. After the war, without completing a university degree, he tried his luck as a lecturer in adult evening classes, freelance journalist and writer – he was also a founding member of the “Group 47”, and a member of the German section

of PEN – when in 1951 the decisive moment arrived: He attended a lecture on “Negro poetry” by Léopold Sédar Senghor at the Institut Français in Frankfurt. He was so impressed that he gatecrashed the private reception afterwards organized by the writer and translator Erica de Bary and introduced himself to Senghor. Through this encounter Jahn found his vocation: from then on he devoted his life to collecting, translating, and editing black poetry from Africa and the Americas: The famous anthology *Schwarzer Orpheus* (Black Orpheus, 1954) was followed by numerous other anthologies and translations as well as by his works on the history of African writing, African thought systems, his biographical guide *Who is Who in African Literature*, and bibliographies.

### 1. The Jahn Estate

Jahn was a maniac. In a feverish but also systematic way, he collected black writing from Africa and the Americas. Ulla Schild was his partner in life and work since 1968 and she remembered how “shelf after shelf filled up with books” in his house in Messel near Darmstadt, “until the corridor had to be used as well” (Schild 1970). Schild’s bibliography of Jahn’s published works (1974) contains 150 titles, including books, essays, and radio features. At the time of Jahn’s death of a heart attack in 1973, his library included 3,000 books, most of them rare species, works of the very early days of African literature, often signed by their authors, including a large corpus of works in almost 50 different African languages. In 1975, Jahn’s library was bought by the University of Mainz, where it was continuously expanded, under the guidance of Ulla Schild until her death in 1998; it then comprised 17,000 titles and represents one of the most important collections of African literatures in Europe.

Jahn was not only fanatic in collecting literary material; he was also manic and meticulous in keeping a record of everything he did. Hence he left behind a large personal estate, which was purchased by the Departmental Library of Asian and African Studies of the Humboldt University of Berlin in 2005 from Schild’s widower Godehard Czernik (thanks to the financial aid of the Thyssen Foundation). These huge stacks of material give witness to Jahn’s voracious passion for literature, music, and art, as well as for people – in fact everything

creative and beautiful. It contains numerous short stories, plays, essays, radio features, many translations of works from writers from all over the world, a voluminous correspondence with publishers, politicians, translators, authors, literary critics – Wole Soyinka, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Abiola Irele, Ulli Beier among them – unpublished manuscripts by African writers, as well as an extensive collection of photographs and audio material. Based on this archive, a research project has been launched at the department in April 2007, a project that aims to evaluate Jahn's role in promoting African literatures in German speaking countries.

## 2. The Universality of rhythm

One of Jahn's major means of promulgating "the word" of black literature was the radio. In the year 1954 alone he wrote around 30 radio scripts, in which he presented and commented on poetry from writers like Paul Vesey, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas; from West Africa to Cuba, Brazil and the USA; African philosophy and medicine, Negro spirituals and Voodoo culture. It was the musicality of black poetry that fascinated and moved Jahn above all, and it was this that he wanted to get across to his German audience. "Writing poetry means making music with language",<sup>1</sup> he said reiterating again and again how black poetry lived through its rhythm, how it had to be chanted, danced, performed with music. While valid for black poetry from all parts of the world, this is especially true of Caribbean poetry, according to Jahn: "Whether the poets write in Spanish, French, English or Dutch, the rhythm knows no language barriers."<sup>2</sup> Thus it is no wonder that Jahn's foremost objective in his translations was to preserve the original rhythm of the poems and transpose it into his language. This, for him, was more important than sticking close to their content, as a remark in a letter to the translator and publisher Friedhelm Kemp proves: "Within some poems I've tried to maintain the rhythmic flow, including the internal rhyme. This meant that I had

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1 Jahn, Janheinz: *Rumba Macumba – Afrocubanische Lyrik*. Jahn Archive, file Funk 1-29b, no. Fu 8, p. 18. All translations from German by the authors.

2 Jahn, Janheinz: *Rhythmische Antillen*. Jahn Archive, file Funk 1-29b, no. Fu 6, p. 7.

to translate the text more freely, of course.”<sup>3</sup> Some of the translators who worked with Jahn found his unconditional dedication to the rhythm very questionable. Thus Kemp wrote to Jahn:

Regarding the rhythm I can't help feeling that you chase after a chimera. Where the reader will read nothing but clumsy lines, you hear the African rhythm. You sacrifice the animated breath of the German language [...], neglect the exactness of meaning and imagery, just for the sake of obtaining three syllables without stress.<sup>4</sup>

Jahn's insistence on the predominance of the rhythm of black poetry reflects, of course, his close affiliation to the spirit of Negritude and its representatives. Replying to Kemp, he wrote: “In all his writings, Senghor underlines the utmost importance of these rhythms and regards it as his main achievement to have brought African rhythms to the French language.”<sup>5</sup>

Jahn had a tendency to universalize poetry and art from the black world and thus to familiarize it for the German audience. Rhythm was one such universal quality of black poetry for him. He found another universal quality in black poetry from South America. In one of his broadcasts on South American poetry he says:

In South American poetry we find dungeon and dance, hunger and drunkenness, death and laughter side by side. Nowhere else the polarity of life is drawn in such sharp contrasts; possibly it is this richness in contrast that is the only common trait of Negro poetry on that continent.<sup>6</sup>

And he continues with a remark that is astounding in the light of today's emergence of a black movement in Brazil but is symptomatic of the 1950s, when race was not an apparent matter of concern for Brazilians:

In South American poetry you hear little about the differences between the races, which usually marks Negro poetry. There is hardly any race discrimination though more Negroes live there than in the United States. [...] In the anthologies of South American poetry, you cannot make out

3 Letter from Janheinz Jahn to Dr. Friedhelm Kemp, 18.12.1962. Jahn Archive, file Korrespondenz Inland L-Q.

4 Letter from Dr. Friedhelm Kemp to Janheinz Jahn, 06.01.1963. Jahn Archive, file Korrespondenz Inland L-Q.

5 Letter from Janheinz Jahn to Dr. Friedhelm Kemp, 18.12.1962. Jahn Archive, file Korrespondenz Inland L-Q.

6 Jahn, Janheinz: *Meine schwarzen Puppen – Südamerikanische Negerlyrik*. Jahn Archive, file Funk 1-29b, no. Fu 4, p. 9.

the color of the writers; in Brazil you don't get any such information even if you ask for it.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. *Schwarzer Orpheus*

The anthology *Schwarzer Orpheus*, which comprised John's translations of black poetry from Africa, the Antilles, South America and North America, was the first manifestation of the sense of universality that he discovered in these texts. Thus he defines his own achievements in the publication of the first extensive anthology of so called neo-African poetry:

I could show that the black poets who wrote in French possessed no monopoly, that there were writers in English and Spanish erupting with the same spirit of innovation and that also in African countries the spark had caught fire (Jahn 1964: 293).

The first edition made known the hitherto unheard voices of 82 black poets in 161 poems; the second enlarged edition contains 256 poems from 133 authors (Jahn 1964: 295). Besides poems from English-, French- or Spanish-speaking regions, Jahn collected and published authors writing in Dutch and Portuguese. However, the number of poems deriving, for instance, from Brazil, Angola or Suriname is very limited, for a variety of reasons. First, and ironically, despite the absence of race as topic that he observed and his emphasis on universality, Jahn wanted to publish black poets exclusively. This somehow biased attitude was perceived by some of his contemporaries as doctrinaire and prescriptive (see below). However, as he did not know the skin color of many Latin American poets, he did not know whom to approach.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, it was not easy for him to get translation rights (Jahn 1964: 297). Thirdly, he could not translate Portuguese or Dutch texts on his own and thus had to rely on other translators.

The numerous reactions of the German literary public to *Schwarzer Orpheus* ranged from great praise for Jahn's pioneering work, which overcame previous prejudiced concepts ("Dealing with poems such as these, the notion of a primitive Negro culture is no longer

7 Jahn, Janheinz: *Meine schwarzen Puppen – Südamerikanische Negerlyrik*. Jahn Archive, file Funk 1-29b, no. Fu 4, pp. 14-15.

8 Letter from Richard Katz to Janheinz Jahn, 23.07.1953. Jahn Archive, file Korrespondenz Ausland A-D.

sustainable”<sup>9</sup>), to a romanticizing eulogizing attitude of this poetry and its cathartic effect on the European:

[...] the blooming luminosity of this poetry, an all embracing liturgy: saying yes, singing yes, affirmation of a positive existence, of a positive meaning of creation, in the midst of all the brutalities, of death, of decline. [...] The European, particularly the affected, anxious and oddly helpless man of the occident, should read this collection.<sup>10</sup>

Reading such reviews of the early 1950s today, one is struck by their quaint over-emphatic diction. While a few German reviewers could not find any access to what they perceived as a confused, alien literary idiom, and some read aggressive, racist undertones in it, others criticized Jahn’s tendency to romanticize the “otherness” that he heard in the poems.

#### 4. Jahn’s reception in Africa

Despite such differing reactions, Jahn’s extraordinary achievements in revealing the unknown treasure of African literature to a German audience and readership stand beyond doubt. While at the home front he challenged the prevalent backward and reactionary perception of black literature as primitive and inferior (Schild 1970), he was just as outspoken in his communication with the African counterparts. How were his ventures received on “the other side of the bridge” – that is, in Africa and the Americas themselves? Some clues to this question can be found in the numerous files of his correspondence with African and Afro-American writers and critics. When collecting poems for the second edition of the anthology *Schwarzer Orpheus* he got in touch with the Nigerian poet Akin A., to whom he wrote on 13 August 1957:

I have read your poems with keen interest. And I feel the need to say to you something about your poems, but I see the difficulty too: you do not know me, I know very little of you, and you might take wrong all I say. To me the easiest way out would be writing to you “Dear Sir, I appreciate your poems, but I am sorry that I do not have the possibility to pub-

9 Unknown (1954): No Title. In: *General-Anzeiger der Stadt Wuppertal*. Jahn Archive, file Rezensionen/Presse zu “Schwarzer Orpheus” 1, no. 59.

10 Unknown (1954): “Schwarzer Orpheus. Moderne Dichtung afrikanischer Völker beider Hemisphären. Ausgewählt und übertragen von Janheinz Jahn, Carl-Hanser-Verlag”. In: *Magnum*. Jahn Archive, file Rezensionen/Presse zu “Schwarzer Orpheus” 1, no. 49.

lish them for lack of space etc.”. But that would not be true. The truth is that I do not think they are good. I think they are not worth being printed. You may call me an arrogant man who has no right to say so, but having exposed your verses to my eyes you have the right to know my real opinion about them, not merely some void flattery. [...]

An example: BLUE NIGER: there is nothing of the spirit of this river, all you say everybody can see on a map. Even poems such as MY VISION lack all reality, there is no image, there is not even any necessity in your adjectives: the word WAVES includes THUNDERING, WINDS are always HURRYING, your verses are collections of commonplaces.<sup>11</sup>

“But there is still hope”, Jahn continues, and suggests that his addressee should read a book by Tutuola and think of what Senghor recently said, whom he quotes:

[...] the best Negro artists and writers of to-day [...] get their inspiration from the Negro-African culture, they elevate themselves into international rank; whenever they turn their back to mother Africa, the [y] degenerate and get boring, flat and dull.

“Are you going to write me again?” Jahn concludes his letter.

Mr. A. did write again. He did not mistake Jahn’s upfront criticism and advice as “an argumentum ad hominem”, and a long-lasting exchange of over 10 years ensued, in which, among other things, Jahn extracted from Akin A. detailed information on various points regarding Yoruba language and culture; A. also suggested doing a translation for Jahn of a work by Fagunwa. Being aware of the intricacies of an adequate “cultural translation”, Jahn was always keen to learn as much as possible about the cultural context of the works he was translating. While he was using his correspondents as informants on languages and cultures he was not familiar with, he simultaneously insisted – imperiously – that they “stick to their roots”. This was also a message he put across to Abiola Irele, with whom he shared a close friendship and exchange – also on very personal issues – which lasted from 1960 until Jahn’s death. On 25.11.1960, he wrote to Irele, who was at the time studying French and Spanish language and literature in Paris (he later also learnt German). Jahn told him:

I find it good and worthwhile that you are learning so many languages, but please do not neglect Yoruba. I think that for a specialist of neo-African writing it is necessary to know some African languages. You are

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11 Letter from Janheinz Jahn to Akin A., 13.08.1957. Jahn Archive, file Korrespondenz Ausland K-O. Written in English.

a Yoruba and you should study your own language very carefully now so that there will be one specialist in the world who will be able to study and to analyze Yoruba literature competently.<sup>12</sup>

Not everybody seemed to accept the – typically German – bluntness of Jahn as amiably as Akin A. and his friend Irele. Particularly after the publication of his book *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture* (1961 – German original in 1958), his dogmatic and patronizing interventions on the African literary scene seemed to provoke antagonistic and adversary reactions. From Nigeria, Jahn's compatriot Gertrud Mander made the following comment:

Africa enthusiasts like Janheinz Jahn with his "desk-theories of neo-African culture" are very suspect here [in Nigeria] and give a false – because too general and speculative – idea of the situation. In Africa there are at least as many cultural differences as in Europe, and you cannot ignore the European influences on the African continent (Mander 1963).

In the same article, Mander praises Ulli Beier, Jahn's counterpart and friend, for his engagement and his appreciation of the cultural and literary diversity in Nigeria. A glance into Jahn's extensive correspondence with Beier, with whom he founded and edited the first issues of the journal *Black Orpheus*, reveals that Beier tried to explain to Jahn, why Jahn's position as co-editor of the journal was no longer desirable at the time of Nigeria's Independence in 1960 and the new Nigerian government's move to Nigeria's cultural life. Instead of limiting his role to analyzing and describing African literature – as would be appropriate – Jahn was perceived as imposing his views and trying to push African writing in a certain direction.

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Being a man of strong views and marked idiosyncrasies, Jahn tended to antagonize people. Despite his great merits and recognition, he remained a solitary figure. Curiously, he appears to have been much more popular in the United States, for instance, than in his home country. Maybe his missionary zeal and dramatic character did not fit into the sober tone and wariness against hyperbole of the German post-war

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12 Letter from Janheinz Jahn to Abiola Irele, 25.11.1960. Jahn Archive, file Korrespondenz Ulli Beier – Abiola Irele.



literary scene. However, one of Jahn's great achievements was the exploration and representation of cultural connections between Africa and the Americas. Within his concept of a neo-African culture, he shed light upon the affinities of black poetry from all over the world.

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